

Dom Hélder Câmara

St Saviour's Summer Sermon Series : Great Preachers

a sermon preached at St Saviour's by the Rev. Colin Lunt on 25 July 2010

Introduction

When we think of preaching or of great preachers, we are likely to think initially of preachers in this country. However, we live in a world-wide church, so I thought it would be good to extend our perspective a bit and look beyond these shores. Secondly, when we think of what a preacher is doing we think inevitably about the message. These two points lead me to reflect on the life and message of one of the greatest and most prophetic figures in the church in the twentieth century: Dom Hélder Câmara.

Overview

Hélder Pessoa Camara, whose life spanned most of the twentieth century, was one of the great prophetic voices of the church. As Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, he gained an international reputation as a champion of human rights during a period of military dictatorship, and as a dedicated advocate for the poor. He was banned from the media in his own country, which led him to tour the world denouncing oppression in the Third World and affirming links between the gospel and liberation. He is one of the most important figures in the birth and development of liberation theology, though not as a theologian, but as a pastor and prophetic bishop. His message is not just political and social but deeply Christian, believing, as Matthew's gospel puts it, that 'in so far as you did this to one of the least of this my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25.40).

Early life

Born in 1909¹, son of a bookkeeper and a school teacher, the twelfth of thirteen children (six of whom died in childhood), Dom Hélder remembers a loving, but strict family, living in a house in which one room was made into a chapel, and his father led the family in prayers. Hélder felt a calling to be a priest from his childhood. He remembers a conversation with his father, when he was eight or nine:

"Son, you're growing up and you keep on saying you want to be a priest, but do you really know what it means to be a priest. Did you know that to be a priest you can't be selfish, you can't just think about yourself? Being a priest and being selfish is impossible; they're two things that don't go together. Priests believe that when they celebrate the Eucharist, Christ himself becomes present. Have you ever thought what hands that directly touch Christ should be like?"

When the boy replied, "Dad, I want to be a priest like that," João said, "Then God bless you. God bless you. You know we don't have much money, but I'll figure out how to help you get into the seminary."

McDonagh, 2009. p.15.

Helder started at the seminary and the age of 14 and was ordained priest at the very young age of 22, in 1931. At the very beginning of his priestly career, he learnt a lesson he would never forget. In his sermon at the first mass he celebrated, he had used some obscure and

¹ 7 February 1909, in Fortaleza, capital of the north-eastern Brazilian state of Ceará.

little used words. Fr Breno, one of his teachers, said to him: “Do not be a fool. You are talking to ordinary people. You have to speak naturally”. This was very apt advice for one who was to devote his life in advocacy for the poor.

Although he took an interest in social issues, at this time his faith was quite conservative, since he was swept up with the brand of the faith promoted by the archbishop of the day, Cardinal Sebastião Leme, the ‘Integralist’ movement, a nationalist movement influenced by European fascism. By the end of the 1930s, Dom Hélder had moved to Rio and was appointed to an important role in the government education department. Cardinal Leme refused his request to resign this influential position to concentrate on preaching, for which he was becoming famous, admired for his wide grasp of culture and his passionate delivery. In 1938 he wrote:

I want to speak the thousand modern dialects, to talk like the people of today [to communicate] the immortal, eternal message, the divine Word.

McDonagh, 2009, pp. 18-19.

The 1940s were important for Dom Hélder in his personal life. As he became more familiar with social conditions in Brazil which was industrialising rapidly, he helped to organise a national secretariat for promoting Catholic values among the growing working class, and he also got to know a group of young middle-class women involved in Catholic Action – they met to on Friday evenings to talk and listen to music. This group became a friendship group and support base for him for the rest of his life – he referred to them tellingly as his ‘family’.

Rome, the Latin American Council, and Vatican II

During the next few years his position moved away from fascism, as he became more socially involved. Dom Hélder was appointed to lead a group of pilgrims to the Jubilee celebrations in Rome in 1950, using a troopship the Brazilian government was persuaded to donate. It was on this occasion that Dom Hélder first came into contact with Monsignor Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, and they struck up a friendship.

Dom Hélder was appointed a bishop in 1952 at the age of 43. In 1959, Pope John XXIII unexpectedly announced his decision to convene an ecumenical council, which began to meet in 1962 (and was to meet for a three-year stretch). Dom Hélder was by this time secretary of the third largest bishops’ conference in the world (after USA and Italy), and vice-president of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM). He became very involved in the council, commonly called Vatican II. During the council, Dom Hélder promoted dialogue between the church in the rich world and the church in the poor world, the “dialogue of the two worlds” as he called it. By the end of the council he had gathered a group of 86 bishops, who became known as “the church of the poor”. On the death of John XXIII, Montini was elected to the papacy on 3 June 1963, and he decided to continue with the second Vatican council, which concluded in 1965.

On 12 March 1964, Dom Hélder was named Archbishop of Recife, then on 31 March there was a military coup in Brazil. Dom Hélder tried to remain neutral, but in following years refused to join in anniversary celebrations of the coup, and so started to be attacked in the press and harassed by the dictatorship, including bombs mysteriously exploding and machine-gun attacks on the archbishop’s palace.

In a speech he made in Paris in 1970, Dom Hélder used his international status to draw attention to the torture being carried out by the Brazilian government, mentioning the case of a Dominican priest, Tito de Alencar Lima, who was tortured and driven to suicide by the

security forces. The Brazilian generals reacted strongly against this adverse publicity, and launched a nationalistic 'Brazil: love it or leave it' campaign in response.

However, even the press attacks against Dom Hélder were silenced, as the regime tried to deny him any publicity and make him into an invisible figure, a non-person. The effect of this can be seen in some of the meditations he wrote at this time; for example:

We must have no illusions
We shall not walk on roses
People will not throng to hear us and applaud
and we shall not always be aware
of divine protection
If we are to be pilgrims for justice and peace
we must expect the desert.

Dom Hélder Câmara

Fortunately, he had the continued support of Pope Paul VI, who said:

Any act of yours, any remark, echoes round the world. It's more important for the European and North American press to know what you think than to know the views of any cardinal, even a North American ... you have grown internally, but you are still as humble as the near-seminarist I met in 1950. Your smile and your look do not age ... Take advantage of this fame. Without ceasing to be pastor of Olinda and Recife – and, thank God, you have a pastor's soul – remember that there are few in the church whose voice deserves a hearing as much as yours.

McDonagh 2010, p.32-33²

Dom Hélder didn't just operate at the political and social level. He started a number of new church initiatives, including a change in theological education from being based in the seminary to the education within church communities. His life was always rooted in prayer. Quoting some words of Martin Luther he said: 'I find these days that I am so busy I have to spend at least four hours each morning in prayer'.

Message of Dom Hélder

South America has been called the most unequal continent; there is such great disparity between the rich and the poor. Rio de Janeiro is clearly divided between the shanty towns on the hilltops and the apartment blocks of the wealthy down below. Sao Paulo, a city with six million cars, is the helicopter capital of the world, outranking New York and Tokyo. In the city area alone there are 420 helicopters, which can be seen day and night cruising high above its vast concrete horizon. It has 50% more helipads than the whole of the UK. Analysts say another 83 helicopters will join the city's fleet by 2010. It is also a city with high crimes rates. Wealth and poverty exist side by side.

Dom Hélder campaigned on behalf of the poor. His message was sometimes welcomed and at other times criticised. He referred to this when he said:

When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.

Dom Hélder Câmara

Dom Hélder's message was not just radical and disturbingly revolutionary, it called the church back to its original thrust of good news for the oppressed, care for the needy, liberation for the imprisoned. He believed in the 'real presence' of Christ, not just in the

² quoting *Dom Hélder Câmara* / Nelson Piletti and Walter Praxedes. – p .359.

bread and wine of the Eucharist, but in the poor, as he said in his inaugural sermon to his diocese:

Although for some people it may seem strange, I declare that here in the North-East Christ is called José, Antônio, Severino. *Ecce Homo!* Here is Christ the Human! the human being who needs justice, has the right to justice, deserves justice.

Dom Hélder Câmara³

It was an uncomfortable message for the well-off. For example, on reflecting on the parable of the prodigal son, Dom Hélder said:

More and more I pray for the Prodigal Son's brother. Impressing voices come to my ears: The first one awoke from his life of sins. As for the second one, when will he awake from his life of virtue?

Dom Hélder Câmara

He saw wealth and material well-being as dangers that warped people's views:

I feel sorry, Lord, for the homeless ones. But I feel even more sorry for the ones sheltered and rooted, who have made of the earth their permanent dwelling.

Dom Hélder Câmara

Of course, it's easy to criticise and to blame other people for the state the world's in. But are we critical enough of ourselves? Dom Hélder had this to say:

When you look around and everything seems dark, before claiming against the times and men's wickedness, try to find out whether you have been the light you ought to be.

Dom Hélder Câmara

Later years

He was prevented from travelling to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize on several occasions, at the instigation of the military dictatorship. However, he received countless awards from foreign universities. His international status never went to his head. He refused to live in the archbishop's palace and nearly always wore a tatty brown cassock rather than the trappings of his office. It was only from 1980 that Dom Hélder was able to speak openly to the media. By this time the papacy had passed to John Paul II, who was not so favourably disposed towards Dom Hélder or what he stood for. By now, Dom Hélder was only four years away from retirement at the age of 75.

When he retired as Archbishop of Recife in 1985, his successor, Dom José Cardoso, set about undoing his work, abolishing the Justice and Peace Commission, and closing the Theological Institute. Dom Hélder refused to criticise his successor. However, he remained in demand as a speaker, though he cut back on his public appearances. He devoted himself to development projects, including a campaign for 'A Year 2000 without Poverty'.

Although Dom Hélder really had a world-wide ministry, his impact on this country has been smaller than in many other places, and there has not been much written about him in English. One book about him published in Brazil summarises his preaching ministry as follows:

One of the characteristics marking Dom Hélder's preaching as a Third World prophet is universality. He has never appeared as a preacher only to Catholics. His words, gestures and figure arouse enthusiasm among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. At times, non-Catholics are even more touched and moved by him. We can certainly say he is the only catholic bishop who really achieves communication and an audience throughout the non-Catholic

³ Inaugural sermon, quoted in introduction by Francis McDonagh to *Dom Helder Camara : Essential Writings*. – Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 2009. – pp.11-12.

world. In fact we can assure ourselves that from 1968 on, Dom Hélder assumed St. Paul's role for this century, being the Apostle to the nations, the Apostle to the whole world. Some have said his message is not religious; nevertheless, Jesus' message wasn't religious either. Justice and dignity to the masses of the Third World. Wasn't that Jesus' message?

Dom Hélder, pastor e profeta / Maria Bernarda Potrick. – São Paulo : Edições Paulinas, 1993. – p.39

The passionate preacher, Dom Hélder Câmara, declined in health in his later years and suffered from memory loss for the last five years before his death on 27 August 1999. This struggle to find the words to speak was a great trial for him and death came as a release.

Conclusion

But it would be wrong for us to conclude on this note of silence. Let us remember that for over half a century Dom Hélder vigorously proclaimed the message of good news for the poor, liberty for the oppressed. He exhorted his audiences to live in the present:

Do not split yourself apart between Yesterday and Tomorrow. Just keep on leading your life in God's Today.

Dom Hélder Câmara

He encouraged the young to find a purpose in life, and was concerned for them not to give up their high ideals. He said:

The secret to perennial spiritual youth is to have a cause to which life is dedicated.

Dom Hélder Câmara

Perhaps, then, we can conclude our reflections with this prayer of his for young people:

Lord, this world needs
this marvellous wealth that is youth.
Help young people!
They possess the inexhaustible wealth of the future.
Do not allow an easy life to corrupt them,
nor difficulties to quench their spirit.
Amen.

Dom Hélder Câmara